

Lev Vygotsky: A Man in Love with His Work

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~LSV~

Cecilia and Simeon L'vovich

*are delighted to announce
the birth of their first son*

Lev Semenovich Vygotsky

in the town of

Orsha, Russia

on the

fifth day of

November

Eighteen hundred and ninety-six

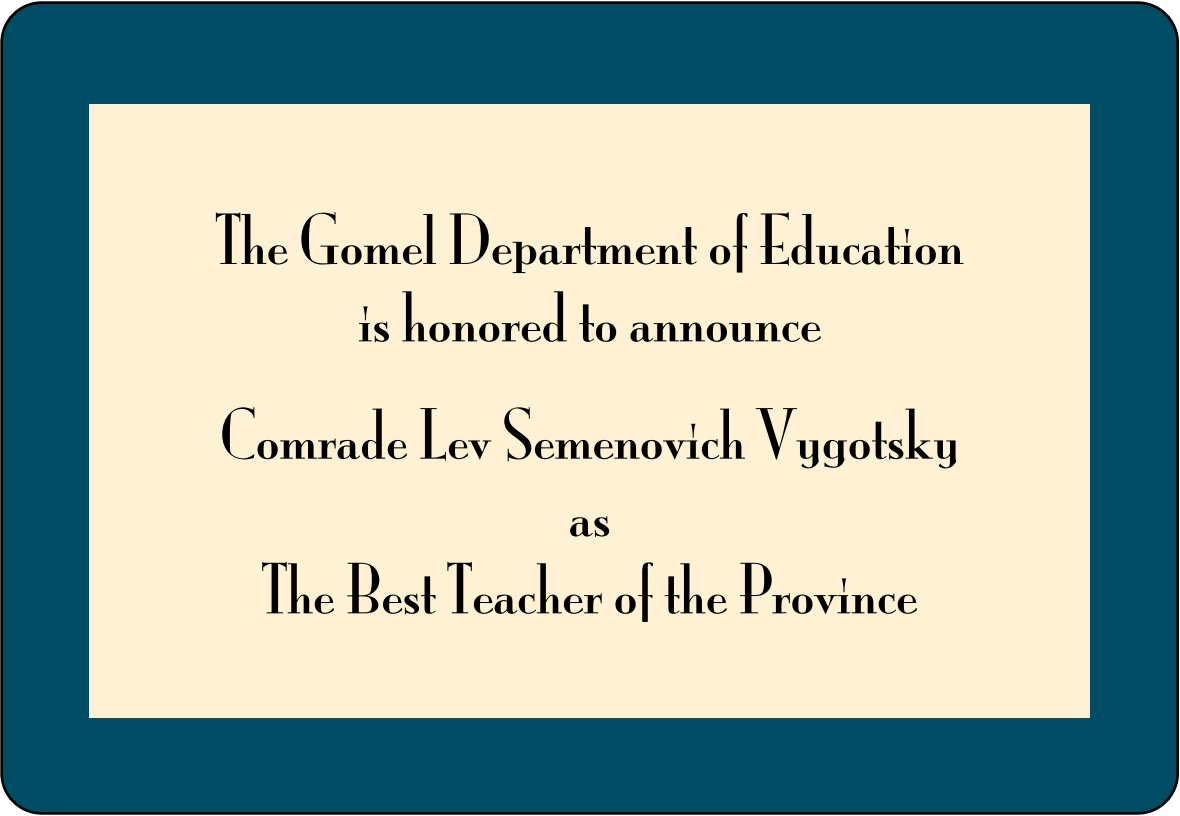
Russian born Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, famed researcher and professor of Psychology, produced 270 scientific works in a mere 37 1/2 years. His most famous work, *Thought and Language*, explores the development of language and the role it plays in cognitive processes. Presently he is most noted for two learning theories, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO), although comparatively little of his writings are devoted to them. Because his work was suppressed by the former Soviet Union for many years, not all of his writings have been translated. Vygotsky was heavily influenced by the Marxist political and social ideologies of the early Twentieth Century. Like Marx, Vygotsky believed the community took precedence over the individual. In terms of the human experience, this means that people begin life as social creatures and develop into individuals (Packer, 2008, p.10). In contrast, western philosophy asserts that people progress from an ego-centric state to one of social awareness. He explains this concept in his *Cultural-Historical Theory* using the four stages of *Mastery and Self-Regulation*. Vygotsky's own experiences growing up and living in post-Czarist Russia exemplify his learning theories.

Vygotsky grew up in the town of Gomel, sometimes referred to as Homel, in modern-day Belarus. Both of his parents were educated and fluently spoke multiple languages. Simeon L'vovich, his father and the town's bank manager, founded the Society for Education and worked to establish a public library (Vygodskaya, 1995). His mother, Cecilia, was educated as a teacher but never worked outside the home. Instead she provided primary education for the family's eight children. Vygotsky was the second oldest. There was a year and a half between each sibling. The family placed a high value on educational experiences and invested their resources

accordingly. Lev was continually encouraged to expand his knowledge and make new discoveries, and he witnessed his parents as they modeled this behavior.

During the early 1900s, Gomel was one of a few settlements where Jewish people were allowed to permanently reside. Vygotsky attended a pre-revolutionary college preparatory school called The Boys Gymnasium where he graduated with a gold medal (Vygodskaya, 1995). From there, he went to the University of Moscow to study medicine but quickly changed his course of study to law. Jewish lawyers and doctors were permitted to live outside of Jewish settlements, and this was apparently the motivating factor in Vygotsky's choice of academic pursuits. While attending the University of Moscow, he also enrolled at Shanavsky's University to pursue his first loves: literature, art, and philosophy. The highly esteemed University was open to all people regardless of ethnicity, although the degrees awarded by this institution were not recognized by the government. He graduated from these universities in 1917 and returned to Gomel to care for his mother and one of his brothers, who had both contracted tuberculosis. It was during this time that he became infected with the disease that would later claim his life. His mother survived, however, his brother passed away before the end of 1918.

Lev began his teaching career at both a vocational school and at the Gomel Teacher's College in 1919. At the college he established a research lab for the purpose of studying how children with disabilities learn (<http://vygotsky.afraid.org/>). He became a passionate advocate for these children and stressed the need to integrate them into conventional society (Vygodskaya, 1999, p.331). In addition to his teaching and research, Vygotsky was appointed the Head of Art and Aesthetic Education for Gomel's



The Gomel Department of Education
is honored to announce
Comrade Lev Semenovich Vygotsky
as
The Best Teacher of the Province

Department of Education. Although a very busy man, Vygotsky married Roza Smekhova in 1924 before being invited to join The Psychological Institute of Moscow University. The couple relocated and later had two daughters: Gita and Asya. Gita followed her father's footsteps and currently works in the field of educational psychology in Moscow. At odds with the Stalinist government and concerned about KGB surveillance, Vygotsky left behind little personal information. (Pass, 2007). Gita is responsible for providing many of the known details of his personal life.

Vygotsky began to vigorously research and develop his learning theories while at the Psychological Institute, although his ideas regarding cognitive development most likely began during his university experience. He also completed three years of medical school in order to better understand the needs of children with disabilities. True

to his Marxist beliefs, Vygotsky placed a great deal of importance on the role of social interaction and community in the learning process. In contrast to Piaget, who believed children must reach a specific stage of development before being capable of learning certain concepts, Vygotsky did not believe learning could be taught. He asserted that knowledgeable people (MKOs), events, and circumstances facilitate an individual's ability to create knowledge. Piaget stressed that the learning process begins with self-initiated discovery and moves toward social awareness. However, Vygotsky claimed children would begin discovery in a social context then imitate the behaviors modeled by others. It is through this imitation that children begin to make new discoveries and create knowledge. Over time the child internalizes what has been modeled and becomes capable of applying that knowledge independently. In other words, people learn first in a social context and then in a individual internal context. Rather than being limited to explaining the learning process of children, Vygotsky's theories address learning throughout a lifetime.

The theories of the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) grew out these beliefs. According to Vygotsky, we learn by imitating the behavior of someone or something more knowledgeable than ourselves. An MKO does not have to be an individual or an older person. In fact, the MKO does not even have to be a human being! Computer-based tutorials would be a modern-day example of the MKO. The only requirements of the MKO are superior knowledge and the ability to model or tutor the target skill. This is where the Zone of Proximal Development becomes important. The learner and the MKO must be in close enough proximity for the learner to observe and duplicate the skill being modeled. It is not

absolutely necessary for either party to be aware of what is transpiring, although it is helpful. These zones may occur naturally or be artificially constructed. The ZPD is a catalyst for learners to acquire skills and formulate knowledge that they would otherwise be unable to accomplish by themselves under specific time constraints. Simply put, the ZPD accelerates learning. One contemporary educational model that deliberately establishes ZPDs to facilitate student learning is the Constructivist Model. An example of a constructed ZPD used by the Education Department at North Carolina State University is the *Ning* social networking tool that allows teachers to learn from each other.



Near the end of his life, Vygotsky began to merge his theories to provide a more complete picture of cognitive development. The development of personality, cultural emotions, and behavioral mastery merge to form a threefold model of cultural

development in his Cultural-Historical Theory (Levykh, 2008). All three aspects of this model are equally important to the intellectual and social development of human beings. Vygotsky was also able to correspond with Piaget during the late 1920s and early 1930s, however, the Iron Curtain made it a difficult process. As more has been revealed about this correspondence, it has become evident that both men arrived at a consensus regarding developmental stages. Both agreed that there is an internal source of cognitive development known as *intellect* and an external source of cognitive development, which includes all influences impacting intellect (Pass, 2007). In fact, Vygotsky decided to associate age specific categories ages with the first three stages in his Elementary Mental Functions and with his Behavioral Mastery Theory (Gredler, 2009. <http://www.simplypsychology.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/vygotsky.html>).

According to Gita, Vygotsky taught until the end of his life. In fact, during the last semester, he became very ill due to a relapse of Tuberculosis and his family wanted him to seek treatment at a hospital in Moscow. He reportedly refused because of the responsibility he felt toward finishing the term with his students. Unfortunately he did not reach his goal. Vygotsky became deathly ill in May of 1934 and was unable to return to work. He passed away at home the following month.

1936

NOTICE

THE WRITINGS, TEACHING, AND
THEORIES OF
LEV SEMENOVICH VYGOTSKY
ARE BANNED
BY THE AUTHORITY OF
GENERAL JOSEPH STALIN.

FAILURE TO COMPLY WITH THE
LAW WILL RESULT IN
IMPRISONMENT!

The Moscow Daily News

June 10, 1956

Writings of Famed Professor released by Kremlin

By J. Barnett
The Washington Post

In 1936, shortly after his death, the writings and teachings of Moscow University Professor, Lev Semenovich Vygotsky were banned in the Soviet Union. No documentation exists to establish why this happened. Those who violated the edict were imprisoned in Siberian work camps.

Vygotsky, a registered Marxist, developed psycho-educational learning theory based on popular Marxist ideology. However he was also interested in research being conducted by western scientists. At one point, late in his life, he pursued a relationship with Swiss psychologist and philosopher, Jean Piaget. The two corresponded via letters and books smuggled across the Iron Curtain. Although the KGB was unable to intercept these communications, there were reports of couriers destroying packages destined for either Piaget or Vygotsky.

Some speculate that this pursuit of western knowledge led Stalin to institute a ban on Vygotsky. Stalin often referred to Vygotsky as a "bourgeois idealist" because of his fascination with western thought. Others have pointed to a more personal reason. It appears that Stalin's son, Vasily, was unable to pass psychological tests developed as a result of Vygotskian theory. In mid 1930s U.S.S.R., there was also an outcry of concern that children

Professor Lev Vygotsky
The Mozart of Psychology



Frontispiece of Lev Vygotsky and facing title page from the original Russian edition (1934) of *Thought and Language*

were being overly identified as handicapped.

Since news of the bans demise, westerners have been clamoring translations of Vygotsky's most famous works such as the *Psychology of Art*. Approximately 270 works have been located. Many of the works found have yet to be published. Priority will be given to publishing them in Russian before attempting to produce translations. It is likely to be a long wait for non-Russian speaking westerners. Perhaps this would be a good time to learn Russian!

The Vygotsky Family 1933



Gita, Roza, Asya, and Lev

Memories of Lev

The Professor and his students



ашкент, 1929 г. Лев Семёнович ведёт занятия в Пе



Dreamy Eyes

Zinaida and the little professor, Lev



MKO Productions
presents

There is no age limit
on learning,
Dr. Piaget!

a brief play
in
one act

starring
Lev Vygotsky
and
Jean Piaget

There is no age limit on learning, Dr. Piaget!

Vygotsky: "JP, U there?"

Translation: "Jean Piaget, are you there and can you hear me?"

Piaget: "Dude."

Translation: "Yes, my good man! It is so good to hear from you at long last."

Vygotsky: "Wanna drop by the Zone 2nite?"

Translation: "Would you be available to join me this evening at the Zone of Proximal Development? I can promise stimulating conversation and delightful company!"

Piaget: "What's up?"

Translation: "That would be spectacular! What do you have planned for our enjoyment this evening?"

Vygotsky: "Got a PS2 4 Gita's birthday."

Translation: "I purchased a Play Station 2 game console to give to Gita for her seventh birthday and I would like you to evaluate its appropriateness for her stage of development."

Piaget: "PS2?"

Translation: "Certainly, my friend. However, I'm not familiar with this particular form of child's play."

Vygotsky: "Kid's game. Think u can figure it out?"

Translation: "It is an electronic game console, sir. Apparently it is the wave of the future, however it seems to be quite complicated to operate. Do you think you will be able to assist in evaluating it?"

Piaget: "Past that stage. Won't be a challenge."

Translation: (hearty laughter) "Of course, Lev! I am well past the stage of development required to make sense of a child's toy!"

Vygotsky: "Bruner coming 2. He is totally MKO."

Translation: "Just in case you run into some difficulty, as unimaginable as that would be, I've invited Bruner as well. He has recently attained the designation of Most Knowledgeable Other in the field of computer gaming."

Piaget: "7 O.K.?"

Translation: "I am available at 7 p.m. this evening. Will that work with your schedule?"

Vygotsky: "C U." (To himself: Gotcha now JP!)

Translation: "I am looking forward to seeing you my old friend." (To himself: At last! I'll finally be able to prove the developmental learning stages are not bound by age!)

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